CLAIMS:

What is claimed is:

1.   A method comprising:

receiving software requirements from each of a plurality of users; and

generating a disk image containing at least one item of software, wherein the at least one item of software complies with at least a subset of the software requirements.

2.   The method of claim 1, further comprising:

applying rules to the software requirements to identify software items that comply with the software requirements.

3.   The method of claim 2, wherein the rules are stored in a database.

4.   The method of claim 3, wherein the rules include rules mapping a software requirement into a corresponding software item.

5.   The method of claim 3, wherein the rules include rules specifying when particular versions of a particular software item are to be utilized.

6.   The method of claim 3, wherein the rules include rules specifying installation options regarding a particular software item.

7.   The method of claim 3, wherein the rules include rules specifying how to test a particular software item.

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8.   The method of claim 1, further comprising:

testing the disk image.

9.   The method of claim 8, wherein testing the disk image includes verifying that the at least one item of software complies with the software requirements.

5   10.   The method of claim 8, wherein testing the disk image includes verifying that the at least one item of software complies with at least one rule.

11.   The method of claim 1, further comprising:

generating a difference image that represents differences between the disk image and another existing disk image, whereby the another existing disk image may be updated 10   to match the disk image by applying the difference image to the another existing disk image.

12.   The method of claim 1, wherein the software requirements are received through a network.

13.   The method of claim 1, wherein the network includes the Internet.

15   14.   The method of claim 1, wherein the requirements are represented in a structured format.

15.   The method of claim 14, wherein the structured format is Extensible Markup Language (XML).

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16. A method comprising:

parsing a plurality of inputs to extract specifications regarding software;

evaluating a plurality of rules with respect to the plurality of inputs to derive a set of software items conforming to at least the specifications;

5   evaluating a second plurality of rules with respect to the plurality of inputs to derive a set of configuration options conforming to at least the specifications;

storing each software item from the set of software items on a storage device;

configuring each software item stored on the storage device in accordance to the set of configuration options; and

10   generating a disk image from contents of the storage device.

17. The method of claim 16, wherein the plurality of inputs are requests from hypertext browsers.

18. The method of claim 16, wherein the plurality of inputs are XML documents.

19. A computer program product in a computer-readable medium comprising

15   functional descriptive data that, when executed by a computer, enables the computer to perform acts including:

receiving software requirements from each of a plurality of users; and

generating a disk image containing at least one item of software, wherein the at least one item of software complies with at least a subset of the software requirements.

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20.   The computer program product of claim 19, comprising additional functional descriptive data that, when executed by the computer, enables the computer to perform additional acts including:

applying rules to the software requirements to identify software items that comply

5   with the software requirements.

21.   The computer program product of claim 20, wherein the rules are stored in a database.

22.   The computer program product of claim 21, wherein the rules include rules mapping a software requirement into a corresponding software item.

10   23.   The computer program product of claim 21, wherein the rules include rules specifying when particular versions of a particular software item are to be utilized.

24.   The computer program product of claim 21, wherein the rules include rules specifying installation options regarding a particular software item.

25.   The computer program product of claim 21, wherein the rules include rules

15   specifying how to test a particular software item.

26.   The computer program product of claim 19, comprising additional functional descriptive data that, when executed by the computer, enables the computer to perform additional acts including:

testing the disk image.

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27. The computer program product of claim 26, wherein testing the disk image includes verifying that the at least one item of software complies with the software requirements.

28. The computer program product of claim 26, wherein testing the disk image
5 includes verifying that the at least one item of software complies with at least one rule.

29. The computer program product of claim 19, comprising additional functional descriptive data that, when executed by the computer, enables the computer to perform additional acts including:

generating a difference image that represents differences between the disk image
10 and another existing disk image, whereby the another existing disk image may be updated to match the disk image by applying the difference image to the another existing disk image.

30. The computer program product of claim 19, wherein the software requirements are received through a network.

15 31. The computer program product of claim 19, wherein the network includes the Internet.

32. The computer program product of claim 19, wherein the requirements are represented in a structured format.

33. The computer program product of claim 32, wherein the structured format is
20 Extensible Markup Language (XML).

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34.   A data processing system comprising:

means for receiving software requirements from each of a plurality of users; and

means for generating a disk image containing at least one item of software,

wherein the at least one item of software complies with at least a subset of the software

5   requirements.

35.   The data processing system of claim 34, further comprising:

means for applying rules to the software requirements to identify software items

that comply with the software requirements.

36.   The data processing system of claim 35, wherein the rules are stored in a database.

10   37.   The data processing system of claim 36, wherein the rules include rules mapping a

software requirement into a corresponding software item.

38.   The data processing system of claim 36, wherein the rules include rules specifying

when particular versions of a particular software item are to be utilized.

39.   The data processing system of claim 36, wherein the rules include rules specifying

15   installation options regarding a particular software item.

40.   The data processing system of claim 36, wherein the rules include rules specifying

how to test a particular software item.

41. The data processing system of claim 34, further comprising:

means for testing the disk image.

42. The data processing system of claim 41, wherein testing the disk image includes verifying that the at least one item of software complies with the software requirements.

5 43. The data processing system of claim 41, wherein testing the disk image includes verifying that the at least one item of software complies with at least one rule.

44. The data processing system of claim 34, further comprising:

means for generating a difference image that represents differences between the disk image and another existing disk image, whereby the another existing disk image may 10 be updated to match the disk image by applying the difference image to the another existing disk image.

45. The data processing system of claim 34, wherein the software requirements are received through a network.

46. The data processing system of claim 34, wherein the network includes the 15 Internet.

47. The data processing system of claim 34, wherein the requirements are represented in a structured format.

48. The data processing system of claim 47, wherein the structured format is Extensible Markup Language (XML).

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